

How social workers reflect in action and when and why they don't: the possibilities and limits to reflective practice in social work

Ferguson, Harry

DOI:

[10.1080/02615479.2017.1413083](https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1413083)

License:

Creative Commons: Attribution (CC BY)

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Ferguson, H 2018, 'How social workers reflect in action and when and why they don't: the possibilities and limits to reflective practice in social work', *Social Work Education*, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 415-427.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1413083>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

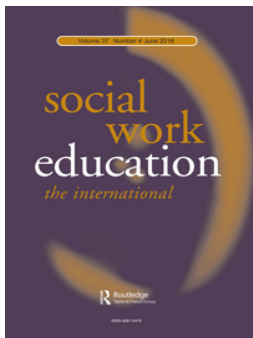
Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.



How social workers reflect in action and when and why they don't: the possibilities and limits to reflective practice in social work

Harry Ferguson

To cite this article: Harry Ferguson (2018) How social workers reflect in action and when and why they don't: the possibilities and limits to reflective practice in social work, *Social Work Education*, 37:4, 415-427, DOI: [10.1080/02615479.2017.1413083](https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1413083)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1413083>



© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 04 Feb 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 6125



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

How social workers reflect in action and when and why they don't: the possibilities and limits to reflective practice in social work

Harry Ferguson

Department of Social Work and Social Care, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT

The need for professionals to use reflection to learn about and develop their practice is now a universally stated goal. In social work however there has been little research into whether and how reflection in action actually occurs and this paper explores the possibilities and limits to reflective practice by drawing on research that observed encounters between social workers and children and families as the work was being conducted in real time. The findings show that practitioners often do reflect in action by elevating their minds above the interactions they are having so that they can think critically about and adjust what they are doing. But there are times when reflection is either limited or non-existent because practitioners defend themselves against the sensory and emotional impact of the work and the high anxiety they are experiencing. Drawing on psychoanalysis and social theories of the body and senses, the paper argues for a revision of the concept of reflective practice to take account of how the self is *defended*. The limits to reflection must be fully recognised while seeking ways to develop the capacity of practitioners to think clearly and critically so that vital insights about service users and the helping process can occur.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 26 August 2017
Accepted 29 November 2017

KEYWORDS

Reflection; reflective practice; social work; reflection in action; child protection; psycho-social theory; ethnography

Reflective practice is a core concept in social work and probably the most well known theoretical perspective across the entire applied professions of teaching, health and social care. Its origins lie especially in Schon's (1983) formulation of how professionals engage in 'reflection *in* action' by thinking about their experience and what they are doing while they are doing it and afterwards using 'reflection *on* action' to think about and link their practice to knowledge (Redmond, 2006). Despite its popularity there has been very little research into how, or indeed if, practitioners do actually reflect in practice (White, Fook, & Gardner, 2006, p. 19). This paper draws on an ethnographic study of social work practice in child protection, in which I observed and audio-recorded the face to face encounters between social workers and children and families, mostly on home visits, and incorporated questions about reflective practice in interviews with practitioners (Ferguson, 2016a, 2016b).

CONTACT Harry Ferguson  h.ferguson.3@bham.ac.uk  @harr_ferguson

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

The paper shows that social workers thought about some aspects of what they were doing while they were doing it. However, there were limits to how far practitioners could reflect in action and sometimes wished to. The demands of face to face work were so great at times that workers could not think about or feel that complexity while they were in it, if they were to be able to focus on service users' needs. Non-reflection arose to protect the worker from unbearable levels of anxiety and was rooted in what, following psychoanalysis (Briggs, 2005, p. 23; Hollway & Jefferson, 2013; Trevithick, 2011), I will call the defended nature of the self.

In social work literature reflection is often tied in with the 'use of self' and 'emotional intelligence'. I argue however, that the 'self' in question is regarded as an apparently limitless resource that the worker taps into and uses to help service users. The theory of reflective practice needs to be underpinned by a much more sophisticated theory of the (defended) self and how it is used and I will suggest that this can be found in psychoanalysis and work that theorises how the lived experience of the senses and the (mobile) body shape our capacities to think and act (Ingold, 2011). Much greater acknowledgement is needed of the limits to reflection and when it is not possible or even desirable. Reflection is too all encompassing a term to capture the complexity of what is occurring in these moments and it will be argued that the interior work practitioners do on themselves is better understood in terms of what Casement (1985) calls 'internal supervision'. Some, like Ixer (1999), have argued that despite all the work that has been done on it, there is no such thing as reflection. I do not go that far. There is something called reflection and it has value, but it also has limits, which need to be understood if we are to achieve a deeper appreciation of the complex nature of social work practice, the demands the work makes on practitioners and the implications for service users.

Researching reflection

The research was based in two local authorities in England and involved social work teams who did short and longer term child protection work. I did the fieldwork myself and spent three months in each local authority. I shadowed the social workers on their journeys to see service users and, with the family's consent, followed the worker into the family home and observed and audio recorded their practice encounters with children, parents and others present. Straight afterwards I interviewed the workers about their experience of the encounter, which was usually in the car on the way back to the office or on to the next visit. Twenty-four social workers were involved and a total of 87 practice encounters were observed, 71 of which were home visits, 9 interviews with children in schools, and 7 office interviews. The research was granted ethical approval by my university and the two local authorities involved and only social workers and service users who consented were included. The core aim of the research was to find out what social workers actually do, how they relate to children and families?—one aspect of which concerned their experience of doing the work and whether and how they think and reflect in real time while doing it (Ferguson, 2016a).

What is reflection and the self?

When students and practitioners are told to 'reflect in action' what precisely are they being asked and expected to do? There is a vast literature on reflection and reflective practice,

reviews of which point to the plethora of tools and techniques for reflection. There are also many conceptions of reflective practice associated with different research and theoretical formulations and approaches (D'Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendez, 2007; Ixer, 2010; White et al., 2006, p. 17). Schon's (1983) classic formulation of reflection in action and on action was intended to challenge the dominant perspective that professional practice is a technical—rational activity that merely involves the application of rules and expertise to problems. He argued that professionals use reflection to deal with the uncertainty that pervades their work, shape their thinking and actions and learn from experience.

In the social work literature, Sheppard argues (2007, p. 129) that 'The reflexive practitioner shows a high degree of self-awareness, role awareness and awareness of assumptions underlying their practice.' Many argue for the need for *critical* reflection, which is the use of reflective abilities with respect to power and its complex expression (White et al., 2006, p. 13). Imbalances of power between workers and service users arising from social class, gender, race, sexualities and ability need to be reflected upon, and unethical uses of power avoided (Fook & Gardner, 2007). For instance, Schaub, Willis, and Dunk-West (2017, p. 440) show that some social workers appear not to think critically about sexuality, leading to some 'bracketing-off' of oneself which limits their capacity to fully engage in the relational aspect of social work.

Notions of reflection and 'use of self' are often used inter-changeably or conflated as part of an agenda to promote 'emotional intelligence'. Howe (2008, p. 185) writes that 'Implicit in the idea of emotional intelligence is a knowledge of the self, particularly the emotional self. The "use of self" is a key aspect of relationship-based practice.' It is argued that the worker needs to be able to acknowledge and understand their own emotional states if they are to be able to get in touch with the feelings of the service user and the potential for their emotions and experience to trigger emotional reactions in the worker (Howe, 2008, p. 185). Training and supervision are seen as key to developing reflective practitioners. As Howe puts it, 'Reflective practice demands that you learn from experience. It requires you to be self-critical. It expects you to analyse what you *think*, *feel*, and *do*, and then learn from the analysis' (Howe, 2009, p. 171, original emphasis).

From observing practitioners in my research it was evident that self-awareness assisted them to be ethical and helpful. Social workers often managed to remain composed in moments when service users were in distress, absorbing their sadness, shame, fears, and at times their joy. Some of the vast literature on reflection provides valuable insights into how this occurs (Trevithick, 2012). Too often however there is a simplicity to how reflective practice, the (use of) self, and 'emotional intelligence' are written about which belies what I have found occurs in practice. The research shows that there are times and situations in which practitioners find that it is better *not* to reflect in the manner advocated in the literature. A significant factor in the failure to recognise the limits to reflection is how 'the self' has been conceptualised as a coherent unproblematic entity, as something distinct and unified that the worker accesses and goes into in order to connect to themselves and their service users. Understood in this way no limits are placed on the capacity of the self to absorb feeling, on the mind to think and on the depths of reflection that are possible and needed.

A professional 'self' can be said to exist in the sense of a core personality and identity that each individual has, albeit one that is not fixed but open to change. Ward (2010, p. 64) suggests that what effective practitioners 'have developed (perhaps intuitively) is a personal quality which overlaps with professional skill to create an effective persona'. However, while

we each have a unique persona the 'self' that is being used by social workers is not a unified, coherent entity with a limitless capacity to be reflected upon in the manner suggested by the literature. It is a self that is fractured; a *defended* self that is principally concerned with protecting itself from unbearable levels of anxiety (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

This notion of the 'defended subject' or self (Briggs, 2005, p. 23) draws from psychoanalytic thinking, which argues that from birth the self is primarily constituted through its relationship to anxiety. The infant is in a complete state of dependency on parents/carers and hunger for instance triggers uncertainty and anxiety about whether they will be fed. Unbearable ('bad') feelings are split off and projected into parents/carers, who become 'good' objects through providing food and comfort (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p. 19). The child's ability to cope, learn and develop psychological well-being is heavily influenced by the capacity of carers to receive and process the child's projections of unbearable emotional states and make them tolerable for the child, by attuning to their needs, and providing understanding, comfort and care (Bower, 2005, p. 155). This process, which Bion (1962) called 'containment', is similar to the kinds of processes that go on in professional supervision where at its best practitioners are enabled to express feelings and helped to think about anything unbearable that has been split off (Ruch, 2007).

Casement (1985) argues that practitioners' experience of being supervised is crucial to them being able to develop the capacity to reflect, self-analyse and contain *themselves* when interacting with service users, a process he calls 'internal supervision'. The supervisee learns in supervision to see how they are as a practitioner and watch themselves as well as the client. They take this learning into practice by monitoring what it may feel like to be the service user, putting themselves into the service user's shoes in his or her relationship to the professional, trying for instance to listen to what it crosses their mind to say and silently trying out a possible comment or interpretation. With practice, Casement argues, it becomes possible for the practitioner to use these two viewpoints simultaneously, the service user's and their own. The processing function that holds together these two positions and states is what Casement calls the 'internal supervisor'. A key task of internal supervision is to enable the practitioner to maintain a benign split within themselves whereby their mind is free to move between themselves and the service user (Casement, 1985, pp. 34–35). In some respects what Casement is referring to is similar to reflection in action and indeed Smith (2010, p. 114) regards it and internal supervision as broadly the same thing. However, in my view Casement's concept of the internal supervisor takes us further than a generic notion of reflection by explaining more clearly the internal work, the self-analysis, the practitioner has to do, especially in very challenging situations, and how not only thinking but *non-thinking* occur in practice. It adds greater psychological depth in terms of the possibilities and challenges involved when anxiety and the defended self result in the professional being unable to think about the service user in a meaningful, potentially helpful way.

Reflective practice, in practice

Social workers in the research generally found it quite challenging to explain what they were doing and feeling in the midst of doing it, in part because they are not practised at doing so. In all of the interview data drawn upon here the practitioners were interviewed (usually in the car) straight after the home visit and asked questions such as: 'Were you reflecting in

there on what was going on at the time?’ The following is typical of the way many reflected out loud on the question while trying to answer it.

Well, different bits. Obviously, depending on what she was saying, I was sort of, I would be thinking would affect I suppose the course of where I was going. So, I was obviously needing to, to absorb what she was saying and to reflect on it to some extent. I don't know. It's a good question about how much you do that at the time. And I think, I think there's a couple of things—I've forgotten what it was now—where I think, I certainly got that sense of her being a bit of a rebel; and the family have sort of said that. That was quite a quick sort of thing really. I hadn't sort of spent ages sort of thinking about it; it just occurred to me. It just popped into my head, I suppose. Whether that is what you mean I don't know? (Leon).

The worker describes how by reflecting on the spot he thinks about and to an extent revises his understanding of the service user and their needs. A great deal of what professionals do depends on what Schon (1983, p. 49) calls 'tacit knowing-in-action' which involves 'knowing more than we can say' and they struggle to find the language to describe what they do. A lot of practice is performed intuitively and draws on personal and professional knowledge and experience built up over a lifetime. The findings support the work of scholars of reflective practice (Redmond, 2006; Taylor & White, 2000) who argue that knowledge of how to practice is not based on simply applying theory and technical rules and expertise to a problem but, as Schon (1983, p. 49) puts it, 'our knowing is *in* our action'. All kinds of learning occurs in the process of enacting professional work. Understanding derives not only from what is going on in the mind but what is occurring in the body and through movement as well as stillness (Ingold, 2011, p. 17). This was evident in the research, for instance, when conversations with parents were difficult and workers moved, sometimes suddenly jumping to their feet and looking around family homes (Ferguson, 2018). Sometimes this kind of improvisation occurs through the worker consciously reflecting in action, while at times it is largely unthought about and is based on tacit knowledge and is intuitively enacted. This means that what practitioners are able to say about how they think and reflect on what they do covers only some of the richness of their performances (Ferguson, 2016c).

Social workers identified different levels to reflection, the most common formulation being a distinction between what is reflected upon in the moment of conducting practice—in action—and afterwards.

the reflecting side of things I find quite important and I do quite a lot of that, almost to the point a bit, where it's like, you know, you're going to have to let it go ((laughs)). And like you can't, you can over analyse or worry about, you know, there's always things that you could have said differently, or missed out, or, you know, but you can't ... But no, I think I definitely do, you do do it during the visit as well, because there are times, you know, where something, and it might just sort of niggle there at the back of your head then, like a little comment or something that you don't feel you made quite clear, but then there's other stuff that they may be talking about by then that you need to talk about, and it is sort of reflecting in that sense, thinking: I'm not quite sure I said that right. (Amy)

Similarly, Monica described the process of reflection and its various 'layers' as: 'It's like you're having this conversation, and yet somewhere, you're helicoptering above your conversation,' a phrase she had heard a counsellor use on the radio.

And it's kind of like yeah that's what we're doing as well, because it's not just reflecting afterwards, you're reflecting whilst you're, it's reflexive, I guess, you know. That you are, you know, you might feel that a certain sentence or a certain, I don't know, avenue is not going where you want it to go, so you'll, you know, rejig and so yeah, you know, there's different levels of it,

aren't there? It is happening whilst you're there, in that moment, but it's also, there's another layer that continues when you've left, you know, the immediate, and then perhaps another layer, you know, when you're sat at home at night on the sofa and something comes back to you, you know.

This articulates the classic formulation of reflecting in action as a form of cognitive self-monitoring which is achieved by elevating one's mind—'helicoptering'—above the interaction with the service user. Eraut refers to this as 'meta-cognition': 'a person's ability to be aware of what they are doing or have just done' (Eraut, 2008, p. 6). This enables the worker to think about her assumptions, questioning style, how the service user is responding, and the meaning and value of the encounter. Monica also vividly describes how reflection *on* action goes on after the encounter in the office, supervision, and at home at night.

This worker was interviewed having just been observed on a home visit at which another layer of reflection—*critical reflection*—was apparent. A mother—here called Maggie—had complained to the police for the fourth time about her boyfriend assaulting her. The 42 min home visit was based in the sitting room, with Maggie sat on the settee with her 12 month old son Robbie on her knee. Maggie said she is now determined to get away from her violent partner. The police had apprehended him but let him go and he has been taunting her since. Monica showed great empathy towards Maggie, assured her she was doing the right thing contacting the police and supported her analysis of men's violence and the poor response of the system:

SW: Yeah, I can understand that that must feel ((interrupted))

Mother: I reckon it's disgusting, to be honest.

SW: Really frustrating

Mother: Yeah, and it's really pissed me off. Because he's had a bad past before, and the thing is, he's very clever, like I know what he was doing, he's so clever he can really turn people and make you, but I'm just really annoyed how he's, 'I've not done anything.'

SW: Yeah, I think you've done exactly the right thing.

The worker clearly practised in a critically reflective way by drawing implicitly on a feminist perspective to place abusive men's behaviour in the context of the social power and sense of entitlement men have within patriarchy and the propensity of the criminal justice system to let men get away with it. This should not be taken to mean that all social workers in the study always critically reflected in this manner; it shows rather aspects of what critical reflection involved when it did occur by making explicit the kinds of power dynamics that were affecting service users.

Suspended self-preservation: the limits to reflection

While the data bear out the existence of some aspects of reflective practice, the findings also suggest that the current popular notion of reflection in action is too simplistic to capture the complexity of how social workers think, or don't. The following social worker's account was typical:

But you're in it; you can't do anything about it once you're in it. You kind of don't think too much about panicking and flapping, because you're supposed to be the one that's in control. You almost suspend it a little bit. It's like suspended self-preservation of: I can't be scared right now so I'm not going to be. And then later on when you're safe you can go: oh my god that was

a little bit, flipping heck. But at the time you just kind of think: I can't let myself right now, so I'm just going to think everything's fine.' (Jenny)

While this worker is talking about dealing with frightening situations 'suspended self-preservation' had a more general relevance to how these practitioners think—or sometimes don't think—about their feelings in practice.

we don't have a lot of planning time, a lot of before time very often just because we're very busy and we don't have the time. But I generally use the time as I'm driving to a place to think about what I'm going to do. And then while I'm there if I think: okay, this isn't really working out at the moment, how can I do this differently—then I will think about it while somebody's sometimes talking back at you. ... Yeah, I think I'm more critically, I more reflect back on the way I asked questions than the way this person has an impact on me. Sometimes obviously I think: god, this person's really pissing me off today and I don't want to be here, and I don't think this has been productive at all. But I do think about, I think about how I use my sessions and how I, how I ask questions and things, you know, things like that I will think about. But I won't necessarily think about how it will impact on me in the moment I'm there. That's more something I think about as soon as I leave the house and drive back to the office and drive to my next appointment. ... And then as soon as I go away and have time in the office or time in the car that is when I think about how it impacts on me. And I don't think it would be productive for me, I don't know for others, productive if I would think about it while I'm there. It's basically that you don't open yourself up too much so that those projections don't have an impact or don't come onto you. (Angela)

Angela uses meta-cognition and engages in some internal supervision that enables her to see herself in interaction with others. She allows some emotion to be felt (being 'pissed off'), but closes off to the possible deeper impact of what she is experiencing and what is being projected into her. She had just been observed on a visit to a family where child neglect was a major concern and like many social workers in the study spoke of the difficulties of shaking off the effects of the 'dirty' home conditions and unpleasant odours that attached to her nostrils and clothes. Stopping these sensory experiences and accompanying emotions like disgust from becoming overwhelming occurred through conscious and unconscious defences of the self (Trevithick, 2011).

Suspension of feeling and self-preservation occurred at times by practitioners consciously turning reflection on and off, to meet the demands of the situation. A social worker, Hannah, was shadowed on a visit where a mother refused to let her in and quickly became very upset, spending 14 min on the doorstep crying and shouting at Hannah and seeking assurances that she would not remove her daughter from her care. Afterwards Hannah went straight to another home visit, which I also observed. Six days later after having been back to see the family again, here is Hannah explaining aspects of how she coped with the impact of the doorstep encounter:

No, and you just turn the music up loud in the car and you forget about it, and then you focus on the next visit. But it's like if you have a lot [of difficult visits] together, then it would be draining. And that's what I was saying about, I think, like when I went, before I went on the visit today, I was sort of ranting to [colleague] about it, like, 'Oh God, you should have seen her the other day what she was like with me, and now I've got to go.' I think it's, I really draw on that, you know, being able to offload a little bit, just briefly, and her being like, 'Oh yeah.' Do you see what I mean?

This confirms the importance of practitioners being contained by having opportunities to 'offload' feelings to colleagues in the office, both informally and in supervision. As with Angela's narrative, it also reveals the vital role of the car as a potential reflective space

(Ferguson, 2010, 2011) and how loud music can assist workers to deal with the deep emotional impact of the work by helping them *not* to reflect. Hannah used the loud music to drown out thinking about what she had experienced because to reflect on and allow herself to feel her raw painful feelings would have prevented her from being defended and resilient enough to face the next family and practice effectively. And it seemed to work, as the next visit was also very challenging and the social worker managed to overcome parental resistance and meet her aim of seeing the child on his own.

The more emotionally and viscerally demanding and anxiety provoking the encounter the harder practitioners found it to reflect in action, at any depth and the less control they had over their defences and whether they reflected or not. ‘Gary’, spoke of this after he had just been observed interviewing a father—‘Michael’—about his cannabis use:

that’s kind of when, you know, my anxiety levels started to go up again you can feel the kind of emotions arrive and you’ve got to be monitoring them constantly and sort of on the move really, so, you know, that whole idea of being mindful, mindfulness, and because you’re, you know, you can’t just feel something and act on it, because that doesn’t, I think that puts you in danger of kind of just, well, reacting to things rather than responding to them. Does that distinction make sense? ... But at the same time, you can’t shut your emotions off because that’s, you know, giving you a huge amount of the information. And so I suppose it always feels like you’re trying to sort of watch the interview and watch how I’m performing from like a, you know, a bit of a distance away as well, just so you modulate your responses and ... then trying to guide the conversation and guide the interview to make sure that the points that you need to make are made, but they’re not being made in such a way that’s going to lead someone to fly off the handle. I think Michael played a part in that role as well really, you know, he was willing to sit and talk and seemed to be reflecting on the information, at least until towards the end. I can still kind of feel that kind of sense of, you can just feel it physically, you know, the kind of stress and attention that you’ve had in your body since, well, last night really, when I went to bed and I was just trying to figure out how, how I was going to do that interview.

This account sets out well the process of internal supervision (see also Casement, 2006, pp. 132–150) and the anxiety and worry that go on both before and during the encounter with the service user. The practitioner perceptively articulates a core challenge of how to adopt the position of acknowledging and monitoring feelings while suspending fully feeling them, so as to make the work possible.

The language of ‘splitting’ was also used by Gary to describe this:

I know when I’m kind of meant to be doing it, you know, reflecting in practice. ... Because say like if you walk into like a house and kind of, you know, immediately the parent starts being aggressive or something like that, then all your fight or flight response is going to kick in, but you still need to be monitoring very consciously. You know, number one: where’s the exits, where’s the, where’s the danger, where’s the risk? And number two: can I talk this person down and do the role that I came here to do? You know, if you do manage to do that, you know, can I see the child, is it safe to see them, what’s the risk to them if I ask kind of certain questions or don’t? And so you can’t ever be fully submerged in what you’re doing because that would put you at risk as much as everybody else in that situation. So I think a certain level of splitting is absolutely fundamental to doing the job, and the more dangerous the situation, the more you’ve got to be able to, or the more, the more potentially volatile or dangerous the situation or the person that you’re dealing with is, the more important it is to be able to do that kind of splitting, because you’re going to have to be, react or respond in a very kind of considered manner to what might be some very frightening stimuli.

Through internal supervision Gary has created a split within himself whereby his mind is free to move between himself and the client, between thinking and feeling. Some reflection

is going on in the moment described in the sense of an awareness of danger and vigilance in monitoring how to get out of the house safely, while at the same time needing to defend the self from becoming flooded by anxiety.

Amy referred to the need to defend the self in terms of erecting an 'internal barrier'.

sometimes you are just flying by the seat of your pants and you haven't got the luxury, you know, you haven't got the mental space to, to do that [reflect], you are just getting by. ... and you've just got to be a bit more on your toes, haven't you. But that's why each visit is, you know, potentially so different. ... If, for example, somebody's being feisty and it, you know, it feels like they're kind of attacking you, then you put your barrier up and because you have, this is not you that person's attacking, this is the social worker, you know. And yes, you have to take responsibility for what you do professionally, but that's when you need to have that barrier, you know: 'I'm not this, you know, crap, horrible, nosy, incompetent person,' or whatever it is that's being chucked at you. I'm doing my job and this is where my job ends and, you know, the rest of me is protected behind this barrier. ... An internal barrier. ... You need to hear and understand what somebody's throwing at you, to be able to respond to it in a way that's meaningful for them, but you need that barrier there for those things not to touch you yourself.

So the worker reflects in action, but only up to a point, the cut off being when the interaction with the service user is felt to impact on their inner self in an unbearably intrusive way. Erecting a 'barrier' to defend their inner life from the unbearable feelings is a means to trying to get through the encounter. The irony, given the importance placed in the literature on reflection, is that *not* reflecting in action provides a basis for being able to act (at all) and getting through at least some of what has to be done.

Some found the challenge of being able to think and provide internal supervision for themselves on some home visits too great.

Well, I didn't, I just didn't know what to say, I didn't know what to say, what to do, and as I was, and as I was sat there I was, I was analysing my own practice, I guess, and I'm thinking: I can't even talk to, I can't talk to the child, I can't even. I felt like I ignored him, which I didn't mean to do, because I was trying to make the effort to talk to him and to listen to what he was saying, but I, as if I was brushing him off, I felt, because I was a bit like, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah.'

(Kate)

The worker's struggle to focus effectively on the child was confirmed by the observation. She did ignore him and found the visit difficult due to the father's resistance, a very tense atmosphere and the disgust she felt at the home conditions. She was able to become aware of how ineffective her practice was while she was doing it, but was so anxious and disgusted she was unable to adjust it to achieve what she needed to. She became overwhelmed. Reflecting in action does not therefore always lead to the worker being able to act there and then on the understanding gained from it. Realising she was being ineffective was a useful thing for the worker to know even if she couldn't change it, because if a worker leaves an encounter knowing they haven't achieved their aims they can at least go back again.

Serious risks arise when the self becomes completely defended, workers stop thinking and are not even aware of their non-reflection. This occurred in a minority of observed cases, where social workers became intuitively, emotionally, and cognitively absent and did not relate to children and parents in meaningful ways to the extent that they and the risks they faced became invisible (Ferguson, 2017). This arises from a thorough-going closing down of the self, rather than a temporary suspension and defence of that self. It involves not only not thinking about the experience of the work but not even knowing about what is not being thought about. As has been shown, non-reflection can have a reflective element

in how through internal supervision the worker gains momentary awareness and makes a decision that this is so difficult it is not safe, productive or bearable to dwell on how emotionally and viscerally demanding it is. Yet at a deeper level not reflecting in action is not so much a choice practitioners make as a product of how in the moment the defended self leads them to enact the impulse not to dwell on painful feelings but to split them off. Its basis is existential and has unconscious elements. At its most worrying, where fear of feeling becomes embedded in organisational culture (Cooper & Lousada, 2005), a continuous cycle of unconscious disconnection from emotional states can exist, leaving practitioners and managers often unable to think clearly about the safety of service users and the well-being of staff, and blame and other toxic experiences may then prevail.

Conclusion

Practitioners reflect in action in some ways that fit with the literature. But the evidence considered here has shown that there are times when they limit reflection in order to defend themselves as a way of making the work bearable and doable. They have a vested interest in not going into the depths of the difficult experience they currently are in. Such splitting was a consequence of the fine balance that has to be struck between thinking about emotional and sensory experiences as they occurred in the moment and not thinking about them too much and becoming over preoccupied and paralysed by them. Some non-reflection can be healthy as a practical way of being that enables the worker to psychically protect themselves, and try to meet their goals. As Smith (2010, p. 115) observes, for some people some of the time 'it is necessary to move away from rather than towards their selves'. Crucially however, any kind of non-reflection should only be a temporary state and needs to end with supervisors providing containment, and enabling critical thinking on what has been experienced.

While Schon (1983) wisely recognises some limits to reflection in action, too much social work scholarship does not do so, while adopting a naïve and flawed theory of self. This leads to the expectation that students and experienced practitioners, even at moments of high intensity, can, even should, be able to reflect in action on their feelings and thinking to ensure a skilled and ethical use of self. Connecting the use of self to reflection in action in such simplistic ways is no longer tenable. Due to the defended nature of the self there are experiences and situations where reflection in action is deeply problematic, to an extent that it may be neither possible, desirable or beneficial.

The theory of reflective practice is not sufficient to make sense of how, or if, practitioners think in action and I have argued that it needs to be supplemented with insights from psychoanalysis and theories of embodiment and lived experience, taking into account movement, the senses and complexity, as well as the sedentary nature of practice (Ferguson, 2018; Ingold, 2011). This reveals the impact of anxiety on the self, its need to defend, and the crucial role internal supervision plays in helping practitioners to think in the heat of the moment. The research findings support Trevithick's (2011) argument that defences and defensiveness are common experiences in social work and need to be far better understood and worked with. Internal supervision is a more accurate way than the generic term 'reflection' of accounting for the kind of self-analysis that needs to happen at a deeper emotional, sensory, experiential level that may enable practitioners to contain their thoughts and feelings—or not.

It is of paramount importance that the limits to reflection are fully recognised, so that workers are not misunderstood, or pathologised by expectations that they should be reflecting in action when this is not possible. That said, social work education and training need to build on the important work that has been done (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Redmond, 2006) by helping practitioners to develop their capacities to contain themselves through good internal supervision so as to be able to tolerate anxiety in difficult situations that bit more to allow vital insights about the service user and helping process to arise. Briggs describes a therapeutic method that derives from Freud of giving ‘free floating attention’ to the client and encounter. It is a way of trying to surpass what is expected of the client and relationship and try to discover something new, unexpected or that isn’t conscious (Briggs, 2017, p. 103). Similarly, Bion (1970, p. 124) argued that therapists need to achieve a ‘state of patience’ in being able to tolerate uncertainty. Of course statutory social workers are not therapists. They work in fast moving bureaucracies where time to devote to service users—some of who do not want a service—and the scope for patience is stretched. Yet in my study I observed social workers sometimes achieving that kind of containment of themselves and capacity to bear a lot of feelings and connect effectively with children and parents, while some others were less capable of it. Briggs is surely right then in arguing that a great deal is to be gained from developing the capacity to ‘sit with uncertainty, powerful feelings and impulses, and to treat these seriously’ (Briggs, 2017, p. 110). It is what is required and social work education needs to enable students to achieve it by learning about the complexities of the self, their emotional lives, and what affects thinking. One form of training that research shows assists in this is the experience of undertaking a lengthy period of infant observation (Hingley-Jones, Parkinson, & Allain, 2016), an approach that is adopted on some social work courses and that needs to be universally implemented (Parkinson, Allain, & Hingley-Jones, 2017), alongside a focus on critical thinking and the dynamics of power in practice.

Finally, this argument clarifies the vital importance of reflection *on* action. Staff support after practice encounters needs to be rigorously reflective, analytical, and critical, taking fully into account the feelings and sensory experiences that may have been split off in action and not thought about. Good experiences of supervision in turn supports the further development of the internal supervisor and the worker’s capacity to contain themselves in the difficult circumstances that threaten to stop them from thinking and feeling what as far as is humanly possible they need to be able to.

Acknowledgement

I am very grateful to Stephen Briggs, Michelle Lefevre and Clare Parkinson for their very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

The research on which this paper is based was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/J006629/1].

Notes on contributor

Harry Ferguson is a professor of Social Work at the University of Birmingham, England. His books include *Child Protection Practice* (2011) and *Protecting Children in Time* (2004).

References

- Bion, W. (1962). *Learning from experience*. London: Heinemann.
- Bion, W. (1970). *Attention and interpretation*. London: Maresfield.
- Bower, M. (2005). *Psychoanalytic theory for social work practice*. London: Routledge.
- Briggs, S. (2005). Psychoanalytic research in the era of evidence-based practice. In M. Bower (Ed.), *Psychoanalytic theory for social work practice* (pp. 15–30). London: Routledge.
- Briggs, S. (2017). Working with troubled adolescents: Observation as a key skill for practitioners. In H. Hingley-Jones, C. Parkinson, & L. Allain (Eds.), *Observation in health and social care: Applications for learning, research and practice with children and adults* (pp. 101–120). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Casement, P. (1985). *On learning from the patient*. London: Tavistock.
- Casement, P. (2006). *Learning from life*. London: Routledge.
- Cooper, A., & Lousada, J. (2005). *Borderline welfare: Feeling and fear of feeling in modern welfare*. London: Karnac.
- D'Cruz, H., Gillingham, P., & Melendez, S. (2007). Reflexivity, its meanings and relevance for social work: A critical review of the literature. *British Journal of Social Work*, 37, 73–90.
- Eraut, M. (2008). Knowledge creation and knowledge use in professional contexts. *Studies in Higher Education*, 10, 117–133.
- Ferguson, H. (2010). Therapeutic journeys: The car as a vehicle for working with children and families and theorizing practice. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 24(2), 121–138.
- Ferguson, H. (2011). *Child protection practice*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ferguson, H. (2016a). Researching social work practice close up: Using ethnographic and mobile methods to understand encounters between social workers, children and families. *British Journal of Social Work*, 46, 153–168.
- Ferguson, H. (2016b). What social workers do in performing child protection work: Evidence from research into face-to-face practice. *Child and Family Social Work*, 21, 283–294.
- Ferguson, H. (2016c). Professional helping as negotiation in motion: Social work as work on the move. *Applied Mobilities*, 1(2), 193–206.
- Ferguson, H. (2017). How children become invisible in child protection work: Evidence from day-to-day social work practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 47, 1007–1023.
- Ferguson, H. (2018). Making home visits: Creativity and the embodied practices of home visiting in social work and child protection. *Qualitative Social Work*, 17(1), 65–80.
- Fook, J., & Gardner, F. (2007). *Practicing critical reflection*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Hingley-Jones, H., Parkinson, C., & Allain, L. (2016). Back to our roots? Revisiting psychoanalytically-informed baby and young child observation in the education of student social workers. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 30, 249–265.
- Hollway, W., & Jefferson, T. (2013). *Doing qualitative research differently* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Howe, D. (2008). *The emotionally intelligent social worker*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Howe, D. (2009). *A brief introduction to social work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Ingold, T. (2011). *Being alive*. London: Routledge.
- Ixer, G. (1999). There's no such thing as reflection. *British Journal of Social Work*, 29, 513–527.
- Ixer, G. (2010). 'There's no such thing as reflection' ten years on. *The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning*, 10, 75–93.
- Parkinson, C., Allain, L., & Hingley-Jones, H. (2017). Observations for our Times. In H. Hingley-Jones, C. Parkinson, & L. Allain (Eds.), *Observation in health and social care: Applications for learning, research and practice with children and adults* (pp. 9–20). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Redmond, B. (2006). *Reflection in action*. Farnham: Ashgate.

- Ruch, G. (2007). Reflective practice in contemporary child care social work: The role of containment. *British Journal of Social Work*, 37(4), 659–680.
- Schaub, J., Willis, P., & Dunk-West, P. (2017). Accounting for Self. Sex and sexuality in UK social workers' knowledge base: Findings from an exploratory study. *British Journal of Social Work*, 47, 427–446.
- Schon, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Sheppard, M. (2007). Assessment: From reflexivity to process knowledge. In J. Lishman (Ed.), *Handbook for practice learning in social work and social care* (pp. 128–137). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Smith, M. (2010). Sustaining relationships: Working with strong feelings 1, anger, aggression and hostility. In G. Ruch, D. Turney, & A. Ward (Eds.), *Relationship-based social work* (pp. 102–117). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Taylor, C., & White, S. (2000). *Practicing reflexivity in health and welfare*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Trevithick, P. (2011). Understanding defences and defensiveness in social work. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 25, 389–412.
- Trevithick, P. (2012). *Social work skills and knowledge*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Ward, A. (2010). The use of self in relationship-based practice. In G. Ruch, D. Turney, & A. Ward (Eds.), *Relationship-based social work* (pp. 46–65). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- White, S., Fook, J., & Gardner, F. (2006). *Critical reflection in health and social care*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.